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Samuel A. Green

WASHINGTON OAK AT MOUNT VERNON.

AT a meeting of the MASSACHUSETTS HISTORICAL SOCIETY, held on Thursday, May 11, 1905, Hon. SAMUEL A. GREEN made the following remarks:—

In a letter from Washington printed in the Boston Evening Transcript, April 14, 1905, is an account of the planting of an oak last year, in the lawn near the west terrace of the White House, by President Roosevelt, assisted by Secretary Hitchcock, a member of his Cabinet. The letter goes on to say that the tree was a lineal descendant of a native American oak which overshadowed the tomb of Washington at Mount Vernon; and that acorns from this oak were sent to the Czar of Russia by Charles Sumner, while Senator from Massachusetts. The account furthermore stated that Mr. Hitchcock, who had previously been the American Ambassador at the Court of St. Petersburg, had picked up a handful of acorns which he found under the tree, and sent them home.

From the seed then planted six or eight years ago there came up a few oak saplings, of which one was the tree set out in the grounds of the White House; and another was placed near its grandparent at Mount Vernon. In the interest of historical truth, I took the liberty to call the attention of Secretary Hitchcock to the fact that it was George Sumner, a younger brother of Charles, and not the Senator, who had given the acorn to the emperor. George Sumner was a member of the Historical Society, and his memoir, printed in the Proceedings (XVIII. 189-223), gives many details connected with this interesting episode. The incident may seem too trivial for serious notice, but a memorial tree, if it is to have any meaning, should be deeply rooted in truth and accuracy.

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Washingtoniana

In answer to my letter Secretary Hitchcock sent me a courteous reply, which brings the history of the Russian tree down practically to the present time, as follows: —

SECRETARY'S OFFICE, DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR,
WASHINGTON, D. C., April 20, 1905.

SAMUEL A. GREEN, Esq.,

Librarian, Massachusetts Historical Society.

MY DEAR SIR, — I am this morning in receipt of yours of the 18th, and thank you for calling my attention to the letter printed in the Boston Transcript of April 14th, wherein it is stated, on my authority, that Charles Sumner, while Senator from Massachusetts, sent to the Czar of Russia some acorns taken from a tree shadowing the tomb of Washington, which statement you correct by referring me to a full account of the occurrence to be found in the Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society, September, 1880 (XVIII. 194), for which I also thank you.

In reply, I beg to say that I have obtained the volume above referred to, and have read with great interest the memoir of George Sumner, prepared by Mr. Robert C. Waterston, from which it would appear that the information heretofore given me to the effect that the acorns were sent by the late Hon. Charles Sumner to Russia was incorrect, but was deemed accurate by me in the absence of more detailed and specific information until the receipt of your letter this morning.

As the incident referred to has found a place in the records of the Massachusetts Historical Society, it may not be inappropriate to bring the story up to date.

While Ambassador at the Court of St. Petersburg, I inquired as to the location of an Oak tree which I had been informed had grown from an acorn which the Hon. Charles Sumner, while Senator of the United States, had sent by his brother to His Imperial Majesty, the Czar, the acorns sent by Mr. Sumner having been taken from a massive Oak shading the tomb of Washington at Mount Vernon.

The memoir of George Sumner, to which you have kindly referred me, now furnishes me, for the first time, with a correct statement of the incident, but I would correct one of its statements to the effect that this Oak was planted near the cottage of Peter the Great, whereas the acorn from which it grew was planted on what is known as "Czarina Island," which is included in the superb surroundings of one of the palaces of His Majesty, near Peterhof. Suspended from the tree is a brass tablet bearing a Russian inscription, the translation of which is as follows: —

The acorn planted here was taken from an Oak which shades the tomb of the celebrated and never to be forgotten Washington; is presented to His Imperial Majesty, the Emperor of all the Russias, as a sign of the greatest respect.

By an American.

G.
Author.
(Person)

2 Je '05

I was fortunate at the time of my visit, which was in the fall of 1898, in finding a number of acorns on the ground that had been dropped from this historic tree. Gathering a handful, I sent them home, and secured from the seed thus planted a few Oak saplings, two of which were sent here from St. Louis, in April, 1904, one of which was planted by President Roosevelt in the grounds of the White House near what is now the north gate of the eastern entrance opposite the Treasury building, April 7, 1904, while the other was planted by myself under the shadow of its grandfather at Mount Vernon. Owing to climatic conditions at the time of the planting of these saplings, both the one planted by the President in the White House grounds and the other planted at Mount Vernon failed to live; but on Friday last (April 14th) I received from my home at St. Louis another of these saplings, and on that date, planted it in the place of the one that had been planted by the President. Altogether, of the acorns sent from Russia, five sprouted and produced young Oak saplings. Two of them I had sent last year to my cottage at Dublin, New Hampshire, and I am pleased to say are growing nicely. One of these two, I will take to replace the one lost at Mount Vernon, and thus perpetuate, both here in Washington, and at Mount Vernon, the historic association growing out of the Russian Oak of George Sumner which, as described in the memoir —

was a gift, simple and natural, accompanied by no courtly parade, whose whole worth consisted in its association with the memory of Washington:

to which I might add: And was accepted by an Imperial Sovereign who, with his successors and people, have shown a friendship for our Government and its people which should never be forgotten. On page 195 of the memoir, it is stated —

The acorns had been carefully planted near the summer palace, while, as a mark of special consideration, a position had been selected for it on the grounds where still stands the cottage once occupied by Peter the Great, and where it would be watched over with constant care;

the actual fact being that the tree above referred to that grew from this acorn is on Czarina Island, as above stated, and is not anywhere near the cottage of Peter the Great, which is on the banks of the Neva directly opposite the principal part of the City of St. Petersburg, and near the cathedral of St. Peter and St. Paul.

Yours very truly,

E. A. HITCHCOCK.

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